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The signatures below certify that with this essay {Treasuring Identity: Subject-Object Relations in Beowulf} has satisfied the thesis requirement for Honors in English.

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Now, earth, hold what earls once held
and heroes can no more; it was mined from you first
by honourable men. My own people
have been ruined in war; one by one
they went down to death, looked their last
on sweet life in the hall (Heaney ll. 2247-52).

In this quotation from Seamus Heaney’s translation of *Beowulf*, the last survivor of warfare among tribes laments the loss of his community. The warrior links such devastation to treasure itself, burying the now useless wealth with his fallen comrades. This passage demonstrates the instability of Anglo-Saxon life and the importance of treasure, which, as this essay will argue, blurs the distinction between subjects and objects in a way that complicates the formulation of individual identity.

Our knowledge of Anglo-Saxon history reveals that the culture was preoccupied with establishing identity based on heroic feats, generosity, and honorable behavior. Constant warfare among nations, however, continually reminded the Anglo-Saxons of the transience of human life and, with no concept of an afterlife, made the preservation of their identities after death problematic. Because deep introspection was nearly impossible amidst frequent battles, Anglo-Saxons placed value in the material. Such fetishizing of objects, which endured beyond the present, was a means of linking oneself to something that survived beyond their own mortality. Material objects were often engraved with detailed descriptions that could preserve the identity and heroic feats of the warrior. Hence, this treasure afforded them the permanence that their own lives did not offer. The most valued objects included war gear and money, due to both their high
worth and capacity for multiple uses. Armor and weaponry, for example, could be used in battle for protection as well as being admired for its aesthetic value. Furthermore, it held significant monetary worth. Coins themselves could be used as currency to make purchases or to be melted down and formed into something else.

Patrick Geary’s description of treasure’s frequent exchange in “Sacred Commodities: The Life of Medieval Relics” illustrates the facility with which it was circulated. “Certainly the circulation of gold seems less connected with commerce than with the payment of tribute, and gold acquired through such payments was often put into circulation again through the conquest of neighbors” (172). Geary introduces two of the most common forms of treasure exchange in Anglo-Saxon culture within this passage. The first describes comitatus, the system in which the lords paid material tribute to their thanes, earning their loyalty in exchange for protection. Also, treasure was often acquired by lords through the conquering of foes and subsequent redistribution of the enemies’ war gear. These two methods for the circulation of treasure were virtually inseparable because the lord’s gifts of tribute were acquired directly from the bodies of the enemy after battle. These gifts not only served as useful and valuable armory, but also as a testament to the conquest. Ironically, the lord needed to initiate conflict in order to gain enough treasure to buy the loyalty of his thanes, even though he relied on his thanes to protect him in battles that would not be necessary if not for the constant need for treasure.1

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1Richard Underwood, in his Anglo-Saxon Weapons and Warfare, underscores the problematic nature of such a system of exchange: “To maintain a warband a lord needed a constant supply of commodities to support the warriors and gold and silver to give out as gifts. Since raids would often lead to battles, one type of booty would be the wargear of vanquished opponents” (111).
The burial of treasure in hoards with the body of a dead lord was a common practice in Anglo-Saxon culture as well. Martin Carver notes the frequency of such practices in both cremation and inhumation burials and the care with which the accompanying treasure was chosen. He argues that proper selection of burial treasure ensures that Anglo-Saxon identity might be expressed through its choice of "grave goods and communing with nature," rather than "directed to deities at formal structures" (30). Thus, as in the exchange of treasure through battle and conquest, the grave treasure functioned to establish an identity beyond death for the deceased.

The epic poem *Beowulf* not only articulates these primary uses of treasure in Anglo-Saxon culture, but also complicates them by depicting the characters' dissatisfaction with the social structures that are founded on the acquisition and exchange of treasure and result in their destruction. The poem includes examples of exchanges between lords and thanes, such as the ones between Hrothgar and Beowulf, which function as planned until the end of the epic when the system fails and Beowulf's thanes betray him. Similarly, treasure taken from the enemy after a victory and flaunted in front of the conquered incites another conflict that might otherwise have been avoided in the Finnsburg fragment of the poem. Even the grave goods buried with Beowulf at the end of the epic appear to be cursed as they bring bad luck to all who come in contact with them and eventually lead to the destruction of a nation. Such incidents exemplify the accepted uses of treasure gone awry. This paper will explore the ways in which *Beowulf* complicates the giving and receiving of treasure, thus constructing a critique of the Anglo-Saxon system of heroic values.
Before we begin such an examination, however, let us consider a useful contemporary understanding of the complex nature of materiality, of “things.” Thing Theory, as it is called by philosophers, is an examination of the ambiguous nature of objects in general and an analysis of how this ambiguity complicates the role of objects in society. Bill Brown, perhaps the best-known proponent of Thing Theory, explains why inconsistencies between the “thingness” and the humanness of objects are impossible to resolve definitively. In his essay “Thing Theory,” he argues:

The quest for things may be a quest for a kind of certainty, but things is a word that tends, especially at its most banal, to index a certain limit or liminality, to hover over the threshold between the nameable and unnameable, the figurable and unfigurable, the identifiable and unidentifiable (5).

The definition of things becomes ambiguous when the objects in question are given characteristics and significance in a human context while maintaining their status as objects. Brown continues to explain how this ambiguity allows things to infinitely expand the role they play in society as “a sensuous presence or as a metaphysical presence, the magic by which objects become values, fetishes, idols, and totems” (5). This expanded role of objects leads to an analysis of how the identity of the objects influences the identity of their subjects. Several theorists suggest that objects are independently able to influence the construction of human identity. Arjun Appadurai explains how it is possible for things to participate in the formation of human identity by reflecting the environment within which they exist: “Even though from a theoretical point of view human actors encode things with significance, from a methodological point of view it is the things-in-motion that illuminate their human and social context” (5).
Appadurai’s observation effectively blurs the distinction between thing and human because the role that each plays in society is practically interchangeable in terms of establishing identity. In this manner, Thing Theory challenges the pure objectivity of objects and reveals the influence that objects have on the construction of human identity.

The social and economic values demonstrated by the characters in *Beowulf* provide an excellent example of how Thing Theory functions to confuse distinctions between human identity and the identity of an object. In his illuminating “Lyric Substance: On Riddles, Materialism, and Poetic Obscurity,” David Tiffany utilizes Thing Theory to address specifically the unique complexity of subject-object relationships in Anglo-Saxon writings:

Although these objects speak and thus appear to occupy, at a linguistic level, the position of a subject, their grammatical position in these statements is usually in the accusative case, thereby preserving their status as objects that are acted upon. The incorporation of verbal identities thus secures for these artifacts a novel position suspended between subject and object, human and thing (73-74).

The personification of objects in *Beowulf* that detracts from the significance of their human counterparts complicates the subject-object relationship discussed in Thing Theory by raising the question of which is acting upon the other. Unferth’s sword Hrunting is given a name and functions as a subject that actively supports the warriors who wield it, but still relies on these warriors to initiate its motion. This dichotomy is described in the following passage:

The brehon handed him a hilted weapon,
a rare and ancient sword named Hrunting.
The iron blade with its ill-boding patterns
had been tempered in blood. It had never failed
the hand of anyone who hefted it in battle,
anyone who had fought and faced the worst
in the gap of danger. This was not the first time
it had been called to perform heroic feats. (Heaney ll. 1457-64).

Not only does the sword’s name act to personify it, but its actions are also described in
such a way that suggest it can do battle with little to no assistance from men. The
interaction between the man and the sword highlights the sword’s identity while
minimizing the role of the man who wields it. The various men who have used the sword
remain nameless while the weapon itself is given the credit for the warriors’ victories. I
will suggest that in passages such as this one, the poet positions the power of objects over
those of men to demonstrate the extent to which men are utterly at the mercy of every
aspect of the world around them.

Beowulf struggles to find a basis for his identity in the epic, and as his life
progresses he relies increasingly on the treasure he acquires to define his self-worth.
Unlike the sword’s name, Hrunting, Beowulf’s name is not revealed until over one
hundred lines after he is originally introduced, and even then he continues to define
himself by his relation to King Hygelac and his father Ecgtheow. “We are retainers /
from Hygelac’s band. Beowulf is my name” (Heaney ll. 342-43). He seeks to establish
his own identity through heroic deeds by conquering Grendel and succeeds in doing so:

I have often honoured smaller achievements,
recognized warriors not nearly as worthy,
lavished rewards on the less deserving.

But you have made yourself immortal

by your glorious action. (Heaney II. 950-54).

The inextricable connection between heroic deeds and material rewards in Anglo-Saxon culture, however, leads Beowulf to measure the extent of his heroism by the amount of wealth he accumulates. “So Beowulf drank his drink, at ease; / it was hardly a shame to be showered with such gifts / in front of the hall-troops” (Heaney II. 1024-26). This changes his primary focus so that by the end of the epic he no longer seeks adventures that will promote the community’s well being, but rather ones that will allow him to amass even greater amounts of treasure. As he ages, Beowulf realizes the inevitability of his death despite his legendary triumphs, and the treasure he acquires reassures him that he will leave something permanent behind and be remembered for it. “My going will be easier / for having seen the treasure, a less troubled letting-go / of the life and lordship I have long maintained” (Heaney II. 2749-51). Yet the comfort Beowulf derives from the treasure is not shared, and the others see the imprudence of his final adventure to which he is blind. “Often when one man follows his own will / many are hurt. This happened to us” (Heaney II. 3077-78). The community discovers that the treasure found in the dragon’s hoard cannot compensate for the loss of their leader, and Beowulf’s people must suffer the consequences of his actions. The woman lamenting after his death predicts the harm that will come to the people with certainty:

    With hair bound up, she unburdened herself

    of her worst fears, a wild litany

    of nightmare and lament: her nation invaded,
enemies on the rampage, bodies in piles,
slavery and abasement. Heaven swallowed the smoke (Heaney ll. 3151-55).

This morbid premonition demonstrates the extent to which Beowulf’s obsession with
treasure defines his objectives and controls his actions by the end of the epic. He loses
sight of the needs of his community and invests his faith in material objects. Because of
the interchangeability of subject-object relations demonstrated in the epic, however, the
treasure proves to be no more enduring than mortal life.

The treasure had been won,
Bought and paid for by Beowulf’s death.
Both had reached the end of the road
Through the life they had been lent (Heaney ll. 2842-45).

Beowulf’s change of attitude indicates that the blurring of the distinction between
subject-object relations actually confuses the characteristics of both subject and object.
By the end of the epic, both Beowulf and the treasure are useless, and the poet depicts the
uselessness of both through the imagery of death. Hence, Beowulf functions not as a
hero at the end of the epic, but rather as an example of the inevitability of death.

Beowulf’s “Giant” Transformation

Beowulf seizes the opportunity to fight Grendel because he views it as a chance to
establish his own identity as a hero, and his rejection of armor and weaponry only
enhances the heroism of his actions. R.H. Hodgkin explains the ways in which Grendel
helps Beowulf in achieving the hero’s goals: “[Beowulf’s] hunger to win fame, to do
something that demanded endurance and heroism, made him seek out his monsters”
(232). Beowulf’s battle against Grendel is unique because both Beowulf and Grendel
completely reject the use of weaponry and instead rely on their own brute strength to fight. Grendel’s refusal to use the aid of weapons is derived from his general nonconformity with the rest of society. As Patrick Geary observes in “Sacred Commodities: The Circulation of Medieval Relics,” a blatant rejection of such societal practices as the wergild system and gift exchange makes him even more fearful than his grotesque form alone:

A stranger, someone not tied to the local community by a bond both formed and manifested in gift exchange, was dangerous and suspect. And conversely, he was himself in danger, since unless he could form such a bond with one of the powerful figures in the community, there was no one to guarantee his safety (p. 173).

Beowulf foregoes the use of weapons in order to prove himself in a fair fight, and his ability to understand and exploit Grendel’s solitude as a weakness, as Geary asserts, enables him to conquer the monster. After his victory without weapons or armor, Beowulf finds confidence in his own unaided human strength. However, the events after this battle lead Beowulf to become dependent on weaponry and awaken a thirst in him for material wealth. Such dependency, as we shall see, weakens his heroism, and his battle against Grendel remains the peak of his heroic exploits throughout the rest of the epic.

Unlike Beowulf, who later embraces treasure, Grendel is the only figure in the epic that completely rejects the use of treasure. He develops a hatred for the community of the mead hall because he is not welcome there, and his hatred extends to all of the practices and customs of that hall as well. “Then a powerful demon, a prowler through the dark, / nursed a hard grievance. It harrowed him / to hear the din of the loud banquet”
His purpose in terrorizing the mead hall is to weaken the social system by demolishing the people and objects that represent it. It is clear that he has no desire to plunder the hall for his own material benefit because he takes with him only the corpses of his victims, damaging objects in the hall as well but leaving them behind.

“Before then, no Shielding elder would believe / there was any power or person upon earth / capable of wrecking their horn-rigged hall” (Heaney ll. 777-79). In his “Fateful Attachments: On Collecting, Fidelity, and Lao She,” Rey Chow equates this destruction of things as part of a larger violence against humanity (365). Grendel destroys both things and humans with equal zeal, grabbing as many as “thirty men from their resting places” in an attempt to obliterate every vestige of comfort for the community (Heaney l. 123).

Grendel’s bitterness against the people in the mead hall originates from their insensitivity to outsiders. As he approaches the hall to attack, the poet describes the sleeping thanes in terms sympathetic to Grendel’s plight. “And there he came upon them, a company of the best / asleep from their feasting, insensible to pain / and human sorrow” (Heaney ll. 118-20). The thanes’ limited sensibility to pain juxtaposed with Grendel’s hypersensitivity humanizes the monster’s distress at his exclusion, making him seem pitiful. The thanes do not sympathize with Grendel’s anguish at being exiled and shunned because they have dehumanized him by classifying him as an outsider. “He had dwelt for a time / in misery among the banished monsters, / Cain’s clan, whom the Creator had outlawed” (Heaney ll. 104-06). Although they consider Grendel to be the embodiment of evil because of God’s curse on him, the thanes do not defend themselves against his attacks, nor do they expect their faith to protect them from him. “It was easy
to meet with a man / shifting himself to a safer distance / to bed in the bothies” (Heaney ll. 138-40). The thanes’ courage and faith are questionable because each man defends only himself. They express fear for their own lives, but any form of mourning for the large number of fallen comrades is conspicuously absent. This suggests that the thanes are not only insensitive to beings existing outside of their community, but also to ones within it. Grendel’s willingness to rule “in defiance of right, one against all” seems noble in comparison to the cowardly reaction of the thanes (Heaney ll. 144-45). These circumstances reveal fundamental weaknesses in the social structure of the Danes that eventually contribute to the downfall of the system.

Hrothgar and his thanes respond belatedly to Grendel’s devastation by attacking him, more because he poses an obstacle to the proceedings of the mead hall than because of their deep sorrow at the individual lives lost to the monster:

Whoever escaped

kept a weather-eye open and moved away.

So Grendel ruled in defiance of right,

one against all, until the greatest house

in the world stood empty, a deserted wallstead (Heaney ll. 142-46).

Self-preservation, here, overrides grief suffered for fallen comrades. More importantly, however, these deaths provide a convenient excuse for a hero to lash out against the monster. According to the system of heroic values, Grendel must offer up his life as compensation for the crimes he has committed against them even though this man price represents the very system of values that Grendel opposes. “How he would never / parley or make peace with any Dane / nor stop his death-dealing nor pay the death-price”
(Heaney ll. 154-56). The poet describes the desire for Grendel’s execution here in terms of an economic transaction, “pay the death-price.” This phrase connects the monster’s life to the importance of economic compensation (which, of course, takes the form of treasure in Anglo-Saxon culture). In this way, the thanes hope to punish Grendel by forcing him to conform to their social system. In his rejection of treasure, Grendel challenges heroic values in disobeying the rule of compensation. The thanes, who have never before encountered such blatant disregard for their system, are disconcerted by their inability to extract compensation from him. “No counsellor could ever expect / fair reparation from those rabid hands” (Heaney ll. 157-58). Chow explains how an encounter such as this one with Grendel has the potential to invalidate the system:

However pure and secluded an object may be in its owner’s fantasy, it is virtually impossible to avoid its coming into contact with a system of evaluation that is external to and other than itself, the intrinsic or use-value of an object, that is, comes inevitably to be validated by what is foreign or intrinsic to it (374).

As an outsider, Grendel has the ability to expose the weaknesses of the system, reducing the legitimacy of its existence. He gets away with not conforming to the system long enough to prove its ineffectiveness, which leads others to question its purpose and further weakens it.

By creating a system of compensation that primarily focuses on the emotional satisfaction of pure revenge as opposed to one based on measured, economic estimates, Grendel solves a problem that continues to torment the rest of the characters throughout the epic. Hrothgar’s anger at the death of his closest advisor further indicates the insufficiency of the existing system because it cannot be satiated by any amount of
money or armor. He sends Beowulf to take the life of Grendel’s mother in a cruel and degrading manner so that he can take comfort in the fact that he has avenged his friend’s murder. “With that the old lord sprang to his feet / and praised God for Beowulf’s pledge” (Heaney ll.1397-98). He has confidence in Beowulf’s heroic abilities and lacks confidence in his own strength because of his age.

However, by refusing to seek his own revenge, Hrothgar loses the satisfaction of immediacy in her death. As the individual most profoundly affected by his advisor’s death, only he can kill Grendel’s mother solely for the purpose of revenge. “He was Yrmenlaf’s elder brother / and a soul-mate to me, a true mentor, / my right-hand man when the ranks clashed” (Heaney ll. 1324-26). In contrast, Beowulf does not have strong emotional ties to the victim, but he does have reasons besides Hrothgar’s revenge to consider in assuming responsibility for the adventure. “I will compensate you for settling the feud / as I did the last time with lavish wealth, / coffers of coiled gold, if you come back” (Heaney ll. 1380-82). Beowulf manages to turn the primary focus of the victory back to treasure not only by keeping in mind the prize awaiting at the end of the adventure, but also by raiding Grendel’s corpse. “The body gaped / at the stroke dealt to it after death: / Beowulf cut the corpse’s head off” (Heaney ll. 1588-90). Beowulf is still emotionally invested in his battle against Grendel, and because of this he desecrates the already lifeless corpse instead of focusing on the revenge against his mother. Grendel’s escape from Beowulf while still alive troubles the hero more than Hrothgar’s sorrow at the loss of his counselor. Furthermore, finding the corpse to bring back proof of his death motivates Beowulf in the battle against the monster’s mother. “The warrior determined to take revenge / for every gross act Grendel had committed” (Heaney ll. 1577-78). In
this sense, Grendel’s head functions as treasure for Beowulf even though it does not necessarily have monetary value. Appadurai explains the reason an object such as this can still maintain a form of worth: “The question is less about ‘what things are for a given society’ than about what claims on your attention and on your action are made on behalf of things” (9). Grendel’s head claims Beowulf’s attention because it represents Beowulf’s greatest heroic achievement. Beowulf’s focus is clearly not primarily on exacting revenge on Grendel’s mother, and because of Hrothgar’s separation from the act, the king’s revenge is not nearly as complete as Beowulf’s revenge against Grendel.

I have explained how Beowulf’s memory of his fight with Grendel influences the objective of the revenge he seeks in his battle against Grendel’s mother. Now I will analyze the battle against Grendel’s mother in greater detail to reveal why Beowulf downplays the seriousness of the threat Grendel’s mother poses. In contrast to the battle between Beowulf and Grendel, which is relatively balanced, Grendel’s mother has a clear advantage over Beowulf from the very start of the underwater fight. Beowulf recognizes the extent of the danger he faces because he prepares Hrothgar and the thanes for his death. “You, if I should fall / and suffer death while serving your cause, / would act like a father to me afterwards” (Heaney ll. 1477-79). Although he acknowledges the possibility of his death before the battle with Grendel as well, he also asserts his confidence that he will defeat Grendel, dwelling on boasts of victory more than on the chances of failure. “Now I mean to be a match for Grendel, / settle the outcome in single combat” (Heaney ll. 425-26). Beowulf notably does not boast before his battle with the monster’s mother as he does before the fight in the mead hall, suggesting that he has less confidence in his chances for victory. Although he appears to recognize the probability
of his failure, he is not overly troubled by the prospect of death even in the desperation of battle because he remembers that he has already established his heroism. “Hygelac’s kinsman kept thinking about / his name and fame: he never lost heart” (Heaney ll. 1529-30). Beowulf’s primary goal in visiting the Danes is to conquer Grendel and thereby establish himself as a hero in his own right, without relying on the identity of his king and his father to define him. Since he has already accomplished this, he no longer fears death:

For every one of us, living in this world
means waiting for our end. Let whoever can
win glory before death. When a warrior is gone,
that will be his best and only bulwark (Heaney ll. 1386-89).

By fighting Grendel’s mother, Beowulf has an opportunity to increase his fame if he wins, and if he loses he will still maintain his fame by demonstrating the courage to face her. If he had refused to fight, he would seem cowardly. For this reason, Beowulf accepts the challenge. Because he has already established his heroism in the battle against Grendel, he does not have the same fear of dying before earning fame that he does in the first fight.

Beowulf’s new realization of the benefits of treasure during his fight against Grendel’s mother alters his perspective on the use of armor and weaponry in battle. In this fight, he recognizes the need for armor and weaponry to protect him and lead him to victory, but this new perspective on the usefulness of treasure damages his independence and openly demonstrates his doubt in his own abilities. “His mighty, hand-forged, fine-webbed mail / would soon meet with the menace underwater. / It would keep the bone-
anyone who had hefted it in battle” (Heaney ll. 1459-61). Legendary swords like Hrunting and the giants’ sword typically act almost as heroes themselves, and their miraculous capabilities make their status as mere objects seem questionable. “The retainers talked of the wonders of their lord’s sword, of its magical powers, of the runic lettering on the blade, the gold of its handle, and its ringed pommel” (Hodgkin 220). Beowulf’s final statement before diving into the lake, “With Hrunting I shall gain glory or die,” indicates that he views the sword more as a faithful comrade that will act on its own by his side than as a mere weapon (Heaney l. 1491). However, the sword does not live up to its legacy in Beowulf’s moment of need, indicating that the weapon is no more infallible than a human. “But he soon found / his battle-torch extinguished: the shining blade / refused to bite. It spared her and failed / the man in his need” (Heaney ll. 1522-25). The sword’s refusal to “bite” suggests that it is capable of biting as a human would, but consciously decides not to inflict harm on the enemy. Hrunting’s act of betrayal demonstrates that it shares human weaknesses and cannot be relied upon, but Grendel’s mother’s use of battle gear forces Beowulf into a position in which he must conform to her style of fighting in order to survive. However, his use of weaponry discourages him from relying as much on his own strength, and his sword falters under his heavy dependence on its performance:

Then, in a fury, he flung his sword away.

The keen, inlaid, worm-loop-patterned steel was hurled to the ground: he would have to rely on the might of his arm. So must a man do who intends to gain enduring glory
in a combat. Life doesn’t cost him a thought.

Then the prince of War-Geats, warming to this fight
with Grendel’s mother, gripped her shoulder
and laid about him in a battle frenzy:
he pitched his killer opponent to the floor
but she rose quickly and retaliated (Heaney ll. 1531-41).

Beowulf’s sense of relief at the opportunity to use his own pure strength is quenched by
the monstress’s continued use of weaponry, but the energy he gains through his physical
exertion demonstrates his desire to return to a simpler state not dependent on weaponry
and armor. The poet views the use of weaponry and armor as a practice that diminishes
the glory of victory, and at times it seems that Beowulf is doing battle with the weapons
as opposed to fighting the monster in the passage. His desire to cling to the glory he
gains in his battle with Grendel indicates that the honor of winning through his own
strength is more significant than fighting with the aid of weaponry as in the battle with
Grendel’s mother.

Beowulf realizes that his heavy dependence on armor and weaponry in this battle
is a mistake because when it fails him, he has no remaining options besides his own
strength, which cannot compete against the mother’s full armory and passion for revenge.
The impossibility of attaining a victory without a weapon leads him to take one of the
monster’s own weapons, and the profound significance of the sword he steals proves to
be the key to his victory because of its historical significance:

Then he saw a blade that boded well,
a sword in her armoury, an ancient heirloom
from the days of the giants, an ideal weapon,

one that any warrior would envy,

but so huge and heavy of itself

only Beowulf could wield it in a battle (Heaney II. 1557-62).

Grendel’s mother’s sword is the only thing capable of killing her because it is what
defines her, unlike Hrunting, which has only human significance and thus has no power
or influence over her. When Beowulf wields the giants’ sword, he holds the mother’s
identity in his hands and controls her destiny entirely. Thus, the sword remains an
inanimate object, but its connection to the soul of Grendel’s mother gives it the power of
a living being. In his “Commodities and the Politics of Value,” Appadurai notes that
living beings come to define themselves in terms of inanimate objects. Such a claim
resonates both for Grendel’s mother and for Beowulf as they choose their weapons for
battle: “Methodological fetishism... is not an error so much as it is a condition for
thought, new thoughts about how inanimate objects constitute human subjects, how they
move them, how they threaten them, how they facilitate or threaten their relation to other
subjects’” (7). Like the humans, Grendel’s mother weakens herself by associating herself
too closely with treasure. The history engraved on the sword’s hilt preserves the story of
the entire race of giants, and its embodiment of the identity of that race gives it control
over the giants’ fate.

Although his acquisition of the giants’ sword appears to be the only event that
prevents Beowulf from being killed in the battle, the poet interestingly suggests that this
is not the most important act the sword performs for Beowulf’s benefit. “Hygelac’s thane
/scouted by the wall in Grendel’s wake. / Now the weapon was to prove its worth”
(Heaney ll. 1574-76). According to the poet, the sword does not “prove its worth” when it enables Beowulf to decapitate Grendel’s raging mother, but rather when it decapitates Grendel’s lifeless corpse. This demonstrates how Beowulf’s own priorities and goals are transferred to the weapon itself. Grendel’s decapitation makes the sword more worthy than his mother’s decapitation because Beowulf is primarily concerned with exacting revenge on Grendel. Brown usefully explains how a thing such as the sword comes to be defined in terms of the person who wields it: “The story of objects asserting themselves as things... is the story of a changed relation to the human subject and thus the story of how the thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation” (4).

As the subject, Beowulf influences the characterization of the object according to his own identity.

The sword’s metamorphosis demonstrates that it has the qualities of a natural force and is not merely an inanimate object:

Meanwhile, the sword
began to wilt into gory icicles,
to slather and thaw. It was a wonderful thing,
the way it all melted as ice melts
when the Father eases the fetters off the frost
and unravels the water-ropes. He who wields power
over time and tide: He is the true Lord (Heaney ll. 1605-11).

The comparison of the melting sword to a thawing winter suggests that the sword not only possesses the power to move independently, but that its movement is mystical and originates from something supernatural. The description of the sword’s transformation is
more evocative than any of the descriptions of men’s actions in the epic. Its history, however, is less mysterious than the pasts of the humans in the epic because it is clearly depicted on the hilt. While Beowulf’s past remains hazy, the sword hilt details major historical events and the specific identity of its original owner, giving individuals a firm factual basis from which they may derive wisdom:

In pure gold inlay on the sword-guards
there were rune-markings correctly incised,
stating and recording for whom the sword
had been first made and ornamented
with its scrollworked hilt (Heaney ll. 1694-98).

In his compelling article, Tiffany explores the reasons medieval poets often use their most expressive language to describe objects such as the sword:

Archaeological evidence reveals that the earliest poetry in English displays an affinity for objects whose rarity and eccentricity were signaled by a peculiar verbal identity. Indeed, it may be possible to claim that lyric poetry first emerged in English as the enigmatic voice of certain highly wrought objects (73).

The verbal identity that the Beowulf poet attributes to the sword embodies the better part of the history of the world. “It was engraved all over / and showed how war first came into the world / and the flood destroyed the tribe of giants” (Heaney ll. 1688-90). The significance of the sword’s history lessens the impressiveness of Beowulf’s victories, and the sword hilt seems out of place in the hands of Beowulf and the Danes. The reference to God’s power in the melting passage functions to reduce the reader’s amazement at Beowulf’s feats in the presence of a much greater force as well. God’s decision to act
upon the sword as opposed to acting upon Beowulf also diminishes the hero's accomplishments. Although Beowulf wields the sword that kills Grendel’s mother, God wields “power over time and tide.”

Hrunting is not the only type of war object that proves unreliable in Beowulf. The temporary nature of Beowulf’s “trophy” from Grendel parallels the transience of all other types of treasure. In this epic, treasure, like human life, comes and goes in cycles. Because of this fickleness, however, it cannot prudently be invested with emotional value. Grendel’s curse on weaponry, for instance, leaves many men defenseless despite their swords and shields:

No blade on earth, no blacksmith’s art

could ever damage their demon opponent.

He had conjured the harm from the cutting edge

of every weapon (Heaney ll. 801-04).

Grendel’s own refusal of the use of weaponry is another example of his rejection of human social structure and also suggests that he recognizes weaponry’s problematic tendencies. He takes advantage of the community’s defenselessness against him in order to obliterate its social structure. “So Grendel waged his lonely war, / inflicting constant cruelties on the people, / atrocious hurt. He took over Heorot” (ll. 164-66). The satisfaction Grendel achieves by overtaking the social center of the community that excludes him is exactly what he hopes for in initiating the conflict. Although he makes no economic gains through his rampages, his elation at his own triumph proves to be less transitory and more reliable than treasure such as Beowulf’s Hrunting, Grendel’s own decapitated head, and the melted sword of the giants. “And his glee was demonic, /
picturing the mayhem: before morning / he would rip life from limb and devour them” (ll. 730-32). Unlike Beowulf’s attempt to salvage a melted sword hilt and a rotting giant’s head, Grendel will preserve his memories and emotions throughout his lifetime.

When Beowulf is first introduced in the epic, his primary goal is to establish his identity as a hero by conquering the monster Grendel. He rejects the use of armor and weaponry in the battle in order to enhance his fame and heroism. However, after his fame is established, he begins to seek mementos of his excursions and develops a taste for treasure. In his battle against Grendel’s mother, he uses armor and weaponry and seems to have less confidence in his own strength. The poet depicts the weapons in such a manner that they appear to act on their own, without human intervention, and their identities are more clearly defined than many of the humans’ identities. Beowulf continues to use weaponry even after his sword, Hrunting, fails him, indicating that he no longer tries to challenge himself by fighting without the assistance of armor and weaponry. Grendel, Beowulf’s arch nemesis, dies in his persistent attempts to rebel against the materialistic, dehumanizing social structures of the community, while Beowulf becomes increasingly involved in upholding them.

The “Lay of the Last Survivor”

In the first half of Beowulf, Grendel functions as the critic of the community’s economic and social practices. He is the lone character who foresees the problems that will result from this system. In the second half of the poem, the poet includes an insertion, “Lay of the Last Survivor,” which foreshadows the disaster that will result from the community’s obsession with materiality. The last survivor’s tale is intended to warn
Beowulf and his thanes of what the future holds based on the survivor’s own prior experience in a similar situation.

Treasure acts as both the basis of heroic society and the goal of the individual hero in *Beowulf*. However, the “Lay of the Last Survivor” changes the nature of the quest for treasure by demonstrating the emptiness and insecurity that wealth brings. The passage evokes the paralyzing sorrow of the last survivor and his longing for the happier aspects of life to return as he reminisces about the mead hall, treasure giving, and the agony of warfare. The imagery illustrates the futility and fatality of basing a society’s survival on the continuous accumulation of wealth through force. Following this revelation, Beowulf’s final fight against the dragon actually lacks heroism as the powerful ruler places his own nation in a position that ensures its complete annihilation for the sake of unneeded treasure.

In this passage, the last survivor evokes powerful images sharply focused on the senseless devastation caused by war and the resulting emptiness of the mead hall. “The coat of mail that came through all fights, / through shield-collapse and cut of sword, / decays with the warrior” (Heaney ll. 2258-60). The image of the warrior’s body rotting with his armor emphasizes the uselessness of the loss of life for the sake of treasure. Though the main purpose of killing a warrior in battle is to take his armor as treasure, this image suggests that there is nobody left to claim the treasure and the warrior has died wastefully and in vain, rotting with the very treasure he was killed for. As a result of his own experience witnessing his kinsmen’s deaths, the last survivor indicates that while gaining treasure is not certain, death is the inevitable result of war. “The companies have departed. / The hard helmet, hasped with gold, / will be stripped of its hoops” (Heaney ll.
The image of the companies departing suggests that they are simply going off to war, but in the context of the rest of the passage it is clear that they have not only left for war, but have also departed from life on earth. The double connotation of the word “departed” in the passage links war and death inextricably, but there is no corresponding image that assures their lives are well spent. “Pillage and slaughter / have emptied the earth of entire peoples” (Heaney ll. 2265-66). This image powerfully evokes the concept of complete annihilation and suggests that the pattern will continue until all but one nation eventually perishes. He clearly questions whether the treasure gained through pillage and the glory gained by slaughter are worth more than the elimination of entire communities. The fact that the wars “have emptied” the world suggests that life is lonelier with fewer people and that human companionship is more satisfying than both pillage and slaughter. Hence, the last survivor’s war images demonstrate how war not only fails to achieve any worthy purpose, but also connects all involved with either inescapable death or a lonely life.

The last survivor idolizes the mead hall through images, describing its role as a safe haven of camaraderie and culture in contrast to the brutality of war. “No trembling harp, / no tuned timber, no tumbling hawk / swerving through the hall, no swift horse / pawing the courtyard” (Heaney ll. 2262-65). The delicate musical instruments of the mead hall are silenced by the gruesome reality of war, paralleling the deaths of the people who make up the mead hall. Even the animals he depicts are noble and graceful, inspiring thoughts of honor and greatness in contrast to the shock and mourning following battle. When he mentions battle in relation to the mead hall, the last survivor glorifies it and fails to connect it to the complete destruction that ensues the fighting. “I
am left with nobody / to bear a sword or burnish plated goblets, / put a sheen on the cup” (Heaney ll. 2252-54). In his selective and nostalgic memory, the last survivor continues to idealize the idea of bearing a sword even though he rejects the brutality of combat. He preserves the idea of the mead hall as the place where the quest for glory begins, not where full-scale warfare is initiated. This separation of the mead hall and war allows him to continue viewing the mead hall as a sanctuary from the evils and dangers of the outside world, even though they initiate from within. “One by one / they went down to death, looked their last / on sweet life in the hall” (Heaney ll. 2250-52). Overlooking the fact that the idea of going to war typically begins in the mead hall, the last survivor focuses on the literal distance between war and the mead hall. The danger of battle does not physically present itself until the warriors are outside and exposed and the mead hall is empty.

Treasure turns from a sought-after blessing to a curse within the last survivor’s speech as he portrays it as the impetus for warfare. He personifies the treasure by giving it a burial similar to a funeral, as if it were one of his fallen comrades. Like his kinsmen, the treasure is dead and useless to him now and he seeks to rid himself of it in the hopes that the sacrifice will erase the previous series of events caused by the treasure. “Now, earth, hold what earls once held / and heroes can no more; it was mined from you first / by honourable men” (Heaney ll. 2247-49). The imagery of the treasure coming from the earth and returning to it is reminiscent of the creation and fall of man, introducing the concept of sin in connection to the treasure. The survivor realizes that the emphasis on treasure has led to the fall of his community, and he begins to recognize the sinfulness of sacrificing lives for material wealth. Attempting to reverse the sin by destroying the
treasure fails because the treasure remains preserved in the earth, unlike the bodies of his comrades. "Into it the keeper of the hoard had carried / all the goods and golden ware / worth preserving" (Heaney ll. 2245-47). Though it is tarnished and broken, the metal's durability withstands time and others who find it will again be tempted by its value despite the efforts of the survivor to end the tragic cycle.

Beowulf's methods of acquiring treasure change for the worse as he ages, leading his own people to complete destruction. Although Beowulf has always lacked success in pleasing others with his treasure, his valiant fights against the giants compensate for what his treasure lacks. The treasure that results from his battles against Grendel and his mother prove that his main priority is to establish his fame by protecting the Danes from harm, and while his trophies accurately reflect his cause, the Danes are taken aback by Beowulf's unorthodox method of treasure selection:

Grendel's head was hauled by the hair,
dragged across the floor where the people were drinking,
a horror for both queen and company to behold.

They stared in awe. It was an astonishing sight. (Heaney ll. 1647-50). Despite their gruesomeness, Beowulf's battle trophies represent his bravery and dedication to the safety of the Danes over his own greed. "The Geat captain saw treasure in abundance / but carried no spoils from those quarters / except for the head and the inlaid hilt / embossed with jewels" (Heaney ll. 1612-15). Beowulf selects treasure that has little tangible worth compared to gold pieces and armor, but embodies the priceless value of history and the reassurance of safety. Grendel's head and the sword hilt have little monetary worth, but they both become a memorable part of history that cannot be
rationed out to the others in the mead hall like typical treasure. "Hrothgar spoke; he examined the hilt, / that relic of old times. It was engraved all over / and showed how war first came into the world" (Heaney ll. 1687-89). This proves that his main purpose in the fights is to preserve the safety of Hrothgar's people and gain status as an honorable warrior.

The "Lay of the Last Survivor" insertion demonstrates the close relationship between war and treasure in opposition to the mead hall through the survivor's use of vivid images. This insertion foreshadows the devastation that Beowulf's new focus on treasure causes his people. "Beowulf can be read as an exploration of the heroic ideal, but it seems an uneasy peace that the hero wins for his people. The poem is perhaps more about the ethics of reciprocal social bonds, and how to survive in a changeable world" (Pollington 52). Though Beowulf has never been skilled at pleasing others with the treasure he collects, his new introspection leads him to commit a fatal error by seeking immortality through the accumulation of material wealth. His self-centered motives cost his people dearly, and this fatal weakness exposes the epic hero's lack of heroism.

The Last Battle

Beowulf's increasing reliance on treasure culminates in his battle against the dragon. As this last battle approaches, it is clear that Beowulf does not have the best interest of his people in mind. He makes foolish tactical decisions, such as insisting on waging the battle alone and relying heavily on weaponry even though it has always failed him in past battles. Although Beowulf appeals to his people on the basis of seeking revenge on the dragon and defending the society against his nocturnal attacks, the treasure in the hoard undeniably sparks his interest as well. "I shall win the gold / by my
courage, or else mortal combat, / doom of battle, will bear your lord away” (Heaney ll. 2535-37). Instead of aiming to win peace for his country, Beowulf articulates his plan to attack the dragon in a way that suggests his primary purpose is to win the gold in the hoard.

As he reviews past triumphs before engaging the dragon, Beowulf reminisces about a battle in which he exacted revenge on the Frisians for the murder of Hygelac. This nostalgic tale is a perfect prelude to the battle with the dragon because Beowulf falls short of triumph by losing sight of the goal in both incidents. Although Beowulf preserves his own life and conquers the foe, he is unable to defend his king’s life. “Hygelac, king of the Geats, was killed / in Friesland: the people’s friend and lord” (Heaney ll. 2356-57). As a thane and a highly respected warrior, Beowulf’s inability to protect his king represents a great failure. Yet this version of the tale concludes with Beowulf braving the worst dangers and returning triumphant with treasure, which leads the reader to question his motives:

But Beowulf’s prodigious gifts as a swimmer guaranteed his safety:

he arrived at the shore, shouldering thirty battle-dresses, the booty he had won (Heaney ll. 2359-62).

Instead of staying by his king’s side to shield him from the enemy, Beowulf seeks self-preservation and glory. There is no indication that Beowulf even attempts to act out of concern for his king’s safety. His rejection of the throne offered to him by Hygd after her husband’s death proves that Beowulf’s failure to protect his lord was not a premeditated attempt to rise to power. “Yet there was no way the weakened nation / could get Beowulf
to give in and agree / to be elevated over Heardred as his lord” (Heaney ll. 2373-75).

However, the rejection of the throne could be construed as a continuation of Beowulf’s desire to isolate and preserve his own glory without accepting full responsibility for the protection of his people.

Beowulf’s preoccupation with self-preservation is evident in his reaction to the dragon’s initial attacks. Although the dragon “has singed the land, swathed it in flame,” Beowulf fails to react to the attacks until they reach his own home (Heaney l. 2321):

His own home,

The best of buildings, had been burnt to a cinder,

The throne room of the Geats. It threw the hero

Into deep anguish and darkened his mood (Heaney ll. 2325-28).

At this point, Beowulf ignores the destruction occurring in other parts of the kingdom and perceives the dragon’s attacks as a personal challenge. He desires to conquer the dragon alone so that he may reap all the glory of victory with no need to share it. However, his rejection of his thanes’ assistance indicates Beowulf’s tendency to value treasure and glory over human relationships, which proves to be his fatal flaw. “The king could be no autocrat. Of necessity he must always gain the willing cooperation of his warriors” (Hodgkin 211). Although Beowulf is generous with his thanes in gift giving, he demands little of them in armed conflict and thereby denies them fame and glory. Geary notes that the one-sidedness of such a relationship is problematic. “The goal of gift-giving was not the acquisition of commodities but the establishment of bonds between giver and receiver, binds that had to be reaffirmed at some point by a countergift” (172). Instead of inspiring his thanes with his leadership to gain their support, Beowulf showers them with
gifts and demands nothing of them in return. This lack of reciprocity interrupts the system and has a negative impact on both the thanes, who lack confidence in their abilities, and Beowulf, who is left stranded. "Men at arms, remain here on the barrow, safe in your armour, / to see which one of us / is better in the end at bearing wounds" (Heaney ll. 2529-31). Wiglaf's loyalty to his king is aroused by the memories of gifts received and the sight of the lord in anguish: "He remembered the bountiful gifts bestowed on him, / how well he lived among the Waegmundings," but the other thanes are understandably unsure of how they should react because of the mixed signals Beowulf gives them (Heaney ll. 2606-07). The thanes' reaction to Beowulf's desperation demonstrates both their respect for Beowulf's wishes and their lack of preparedness for battle. "And now the youth / was to enter the line of battle with his lord, / his first time to be tested as a fighter" (Heaney ll. 2625-27). It is difficult to say definitively whether the thanes are being cowardly or simply obedient. "No help or backing was to be had then / from his high-born comrades; that hand-picked troop / broke ranks and ran for their lives" (Heaney ll. 2596-98). Instead of training his troops and preparing them for battle, Beowulf asserts his ability to take care of the matters at hand by himself and refuses assistance. "Yet the prince of the rings was too proud / to line up with a large army / against the sky-plague" (Heaney ll. 2345-47). Hence, his thanes find themselves confused, frightened, and utterly unprepared when they witness their lord being beaten by the foe. Beowulf has established himself as a legend, and as such he distances himself from all meaningful human relationships:

This fight is not yours,

nor is it up to any man except me
to measure his strength against the monster

or to prove his worth (Heaney ll. 2529-35).

The repercussions of this failure to connect with his followers haunt him when he finds himself deserted in the midst of the most difficult battle of his life. However, even in this moment of desperation, Beowulf never rescinds his command that the thanes “remain here on the barrow, / safe in your armor” (Heaney ll. 2329-30).

Beowulf’s failure to develop and maintain reciprocal bonds with people further affects him at the end of his life when he laments having sacrificed the opportunity to create a family for the sake of pursuing glory and wealth:

Now is the time when I would have wanted
to bestow this armour on my own son,

had it been my fortune to have fathered an heir

and live on in his flesh (Heaney ll. 2729-33).

Beowulf realizes on his deathbed that an heir could have alleviated his concerns about the continuation of his legacy more effectively than a hoard of riches. Yet the hero refuses to acknowledge his own culpability for rejecting human affection and blames his failure to produce an heir on his fortune, suggesting that it is completely beyond his control.

Although Wiglaf acts as a satisfactory surrogate heir, his loyalty to Beowulf is derived solely from his admiration for the hero’s past deeds and his direct familial connection to him. “But within one heart / sorrow welled up: in a man of worth / the claims of kinship cannot be denied” (Heaney ll. 2599-2601). There is no reference to Beowulf forming personal relationships with any thane on an individual basis, and Wiglaf’s dedication originates from his sympathy, and perhaps pity, for the hero:
Go on, dear Beowulf, do everything
You said you would when you were still young
And vowed you would never let your name and fame
Be dimmed while you lived. Your deeds are famous,
So stay resolute, my lord, defend your life now (Heaney ll. 2663-67).

Beowulf attempts to fill the void left by the absence of personal bonds by amassing material wealth, but he finds this substitution lacking by the end of the epic. He fails to recognize that his sword, no matter how renowned, cannot protect him completely—even after he has already experienced several battles in which weaponry fails him. “It was never his fortune / to be helped in combat by the cutting edge / of weapons made of iron” (Heaney ll. 2682-84). That weaponry fails to provide Beowulf physical protection is paralleled by the hoard’s failure to provide the community with economic security. Instead of ensuring his heroic reputation after death, Beowulf’s acquired wealth leads to the exposure of his fundamental weaknesses. He fails to learn from the lessons life has given him:

Often when one man follows his own will
many are hurt. This happened to us.

Nothing we advised could ever convince
the prince we loved, our land’s guardian,
not to vex the custodian of the gold (Heaney ll. 3077-81).

The thanes do not support Beowulf’s desire to acquire more treasure by fighting the dragon, but in prioritizing his own wishes, the hero fails to note their lack of enthusiasm. By favoring the pursuit of wealth at the expense of human relationships, it becomes hard
to separate one from the other. “The treasure had been won, / bought and paid for by
Beowulf’s death. / Both had reached the end of the road / through the life they had been
lent” (Heaney ll. 2842-45). Beowulf gives his own life for the treasure because he thinks
that it will support his people after his death, but in fact the treasure is connected to
Beowulf in such a manner that makes it impossible to separate them, and it essentially
dies with him:

Sometimes fame almost crystallizes into the winning of gold. In his dying speech
Beowulf is reconciled to death because he has given his own life for the dragon’s
hoard of gold; the ‘countless store of twisted gold’ is an end in itself.

Nonetheless, the chief does not fight simply for his own gain. He fights for his
people (Hodgkin 236).

At the point of Beowulf’s death, he believes that he has achieved his goal and
assumes that the treasure will be utilized to aid his people financially. The community,
however, sees the curse that the treasure brings with it despite Beowulf’s blindness to it:

The high-born chiefs who had buried the treasure
Declared it until doomsday so accursed
That whoever robbed it would be guilty of wrong
And grimly punished for their transgression,
Hasped in hell-bonds in heathen shrines.
Yet Beowulf’s gaze at the gold treasure
When he first saw it had not been selfish (Heaney ll. 3069-75).

Because Beowulf fights and gains glory alone as he wishes, however, his people feel that
they have no claim to the wealth that his death has paid for because they themselves have
not contributed to its acquisition. "They let the ground keep that ancestral treasure, / gold under gravel, gone to earth, / as useless to men now as it ever was" (Heaney ll. 3166-68). Hence, Beowulf essentially dies for the decoration of his own tomb, failing to recognize that the treasure for which he fought will not save or even help his nation.

**Conclusion**

Although in the beginning of the epic Beowulf challenges standard cultural practice by refusing to use armor and weaponry, he later conforms to the system. Once he establishes his heroism by taking great risks, he seeks to preserve his fame by accepting more of the common cultural practices. His nonconformity originally sets him apart, but he realizes that its continuation could possibly alienate him and turn him into an "outsider" like Grendel. Every time Beowulf conforms and succumbs to the dictates of the heroic system, however, it weakens him. Age, and responsibility for a kingdom, ultimately, and ironically, reduce Beowulf's wisdom and perceptiveness instead of augmenting them.

As Beowulf ages and realizes the inevitability of his own mortality, he tries to accumulate large amounts of treasure in an effort to leave something of his life and legacy behind. He doubts the endurance of his fame because of its intangibility and is able to reassure himself only after touching the hoard treasure that ironically costs his people their future. "I give thanks / that I behold this treasure here in front of me, / that I have been allowed to leave my people / so well endowed on the day I die" (Heaney ll. 2795-98). Although the financial health of his country is an important factor in its ability to remain autonomous, his method of obtaining the treasure is much more self-serving (particularly when compared to that of his previous quests) and demonstrates underlying
weaknesses in the seemingly invincible hero. “I shall win the gold / by my courage, or else mortal combat, / doom of battle, will bear your lord away” (Heaney ll. 2535-37).

Beowulf’s introspection leads him to seek glory and wealth to preserve his memory after death. Unlike the battles against Grendel and Grendel’s mother, Beowulf’s actions against the dragon clearly prioritize the winning of treasure over the safety of the people. Beowulf seems to believe that revenge upon the dragon is a justification for risking not only his life, but the stability of the leadership of his nation. The hoard that he wins illustrates how material objects are not necessarily longer lasting or more stable than mortals. Treasure’s intimate connection with the human body in the social structure of the community demonstrates how the failure of one inevitably leads to the downfall of the other. “We begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us, when their flow within the circuits of production and distribution… has been arrested, however momentarily” (Brown 4).
Works Cited


